Foreword

Introduction to the Evolution of Gaming

Writing an introduction to the “evolution” of games (videogames, non-digital games or otherwise) feels daunting. Actually, it is probably that I’m simply being difficult about it. As an anthropologist of game development, game developer and a player of games, I feel like I have a sense of their evolutionary flows. Yet my training comes from the strange interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies, which, perhaps predictably, means that my first response isn’t, “Indeed… Games have changed,” but rather, “What is evolution anyway? Have games evolved?” Thus, I apologize in advance for what comes next.

I suspect that if I were to ask an Executive Producer at Electronic Arts, Nintendo or Sony if games have evolved, they would likely answer in a kind of resounding. “Yes, of course!” Evolution appeals to a kind of market-based logic that dominates the mainstream “triple-A” or “AAA” game industry. Market logics plug directly into the narrative of “natural selection” or that “the strong survive,” which should not be equated to evolution by any means, though it is often how it is imagined. Shifts in computational power and the rise of technologies also, sort of, lend themselves to this kind of grand evolutionary narrative. Darwinism, as it is frequently argued, fits well into broader social and cultural conceptions of meritocracy and might makes right. Comfortable narratives of progress and infinite growth should probably make anyone nervous.

At this precise moment, it is that mainstream industry that is undergoing seismic tectonic shifts. I frequently tell students that the shifts we are seeing in the game industry, if we can even consider such a monolithic concept to even exist, parallel those of 1984-5. To which, I pose the question, what kind of evolution are we witnessing in that case? What species will emerge from this particular epoch? Because, the reality is that evolution is much more complicated than the overly simplified vision of it as a kind of capitalist market economy for DNA or a “survival of the fittest.” Rather, something far more interesting is going on when we advance the idea that games have evolved and that the implications of those shifts have had broad social, cultural and political ramifications.

This is a perspective that others and I have advanced on numerous occasions: That games and the craft of game development have dramatic implications for society, culture and our political economic systems. I’ve gone so far as to say that games in/as/of/through culture ought to be how we understand this particular cultural form (Malaby, 2009; O’Donnell, 2014). So, I’ve clearly drunk the Kool-Aid that forms the foundation of many of the entries contained herein. But, what if we take the metaphor of evolution seriously in the context of this collected volume? Not the Darwinism as Market Capitalism metaphor, but rather a reading of evolution as one also rooted in epigenetics through which a variety of factors may come to influence the evolutionary traits passed down over the years.
I once quipped that evolution makes a really boring game mechanic, because like diffusion and all sorts of other natural processes, it just kind of happens. And the idea that there is a kind of guiding hand for evolution lands us quickly in the hands of people arguing for the teaching of “intelligent” design. Yet, we clearly do shape and are shaped by our own activities when you look at the current state of evolution. Monsanto is in the business of intelligent design. High-fructose corn syrup and the human (at least the American) body demands that we face the fact that we are manipulating these systems in ways we don’t fully understand. To which I can then ask, what kind of monsters are we making (O’Donnell, 2015)?

Now, to be clear, I’m not sailing down an epigenetic stream where thoughts can cure cancer, but rather that genetic regulation and expression are complex factors subject to a wide array of factors. It allows us to think, in particular, about things like toxicology and the ways in which genetics, and thus evolution, have become imbricated by a complex heritage that implicates human activity and non-human activity in the future of evolutionary processes.

I don’t know if I’d go so far as to call games a kind of “companion species,” but that might be a reasonable starting point for thinking through from an evolutionary perspective where games have come from and where they are going. Not unlike dogs, games serve as a kind of “obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship” with humanity (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Games are part of us as much as our companion species, and while not biological in the same sense, they’ve kind of always been with us along the way and mutated, shifted, moved, grown and evolved along side us. And they have returned the favor, in all likelihood manipulating us as well.

In many ways, the metaphor works well for the evolution of games. Much like dog breeds, particular kinds of games have enjoyed more or less care over time. We have deliberately cultivated particular traits and neglected others. Some breeds have thrived and others have suffered under the less watchful eyes of their breeders. Mutts, mongrels, half-breeds and hybrid breeds have emerged for a variety of reasons. Not unlike dogs, games have served in both war and peace. They both reflect and reflect back on broader social and cultural shifts.

Which is why exploring the co-evolution of games makes particular sense at this moment in their (our) history (histories). Which is why asking questions about what are games is important. Our definition of what counts as a game or videogame is of crucial import. Calling attention to particularly important, compelling, notable or infamous games provides a compelling story for how we might want to think about our co-evolutionary existence with these things that are both simultaneously frivolous and incredibly meaningful.

Games implicate us in this co-evolutionary moment. As Monforton notes in this volume, “There are no observers here.” Well, there are, but they too are implicated in this whole system. Twitch.tv has made what was always the case even more abundantly clear. We are playing even when we are observing. Certainly as someone who teaches at a “Division I” sports university, I can attest to the role that a spectator plays when they too step into the magic circles called “stadiums” where games like Basketball, Football (of the American variety) and Hockey are played. And yet, I can also recall quite fondly times spent watching my cousin play The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past on his Super Nintendo Entertainment System. I was the keeper of the strategy guide as he played along.

It also makes the role of Game Studies, as a field, if we can imagine that such a unified field exists, all the more critical. If games are evolving along with us, then they are a thing worth studying in their own right. Not simply because they can be “games for change” or “serious games” or “games for health.”
Games are important. Part of the evolution of games is understanding them as important in their own right. Indeed, we can look to them for sites where formal or informal learning occurs, but that isn’t why they’re important. Games may be sites where we can understand how “effects” of games occur, but that isn’t why they’re important. They’re important because they simultaneously mean something and mean nothing at all. The meaningful and meaninglessness of them intertwines in ways that make them special.

So too have games had strange entanglements with how we understand femininity and masculinity. The embodied nature of games and play often cannot be avoided. Even in “virtual” spaces we embody avatars that embody us, or not. This may even be more intense when we extend our understandings of games to sports. One might even argue that is one reason why scholars studying games have been recalcitrant in their pursuit of studying sports games. It is hard to avoid when videogames begin to become more sports-like. Competition is fierce in sports and bodies matter in ways that complicate our understanding of them, and yet games, precisely by their designed character, mean that often times we make uncomfortable choices about what counts and what doesn’t.

But none of this is really new. It has been a part of the human experience all along. Games have moved with us and changed with the times. We can’t say that only the text of a game matters, or that only players matter or that only the developers matter. In this complicated system all of the components matter. As researchers of games (or makers of games or those studying creators of games) we make decisions about which aspects of the system we examine, yet, all matter simultaneously. So, we continue to muddle through our study of them and of ourselves. Games both help and hinder our understanding of the world. They simultaneously over-complicate and simplify things. That is what makes them interesting.

While some might argue that games have “simply” changed to mirror the political-economic moment of the times, I think that neglects the kinship ties that games have with us and with themselves. They change how we think about a great many things. Education is one particularly salient more or less playful system that games have forced us to think quite differently about. I cannot help but look at the DNA (aka “structure”) of the “big bad game industry” in 2008 and its subsequent mutations through 2014 implicated in what eventually became #GAMERGATE on Twitter (and in real life) (Chess & Shaw, 2015). The shifting structure of games and our relationship with them was under shift and change. Little wonder there were those who once defined and defended one “breed” over another would find discomfort in the “destruction” of a particular species. When what was ultimately happening was that the ecosystem was diversifying. But tell that to the species that feels under threat.

Games have evolved not because we’ve brought them along with us. Games have evolved because they’ve changed us as much as we’ve changed them. This volume seeks to take very seriously (or not, because that’s part of the point) the broader social, political, economic, educational, fun, serious, silly, salient, designed, sad or otherwise role that games have in our current moment. This isn’t a sign that games have “come of age,” but rather that we, collectively, have come of age to understand the role that these systems have in our broader human, collective journey.

The window at the end of the hallway in which my office is located looks out on what I often refer to as, “the church of football.” I transitioned from being a Georgia Bulldog to being a Michigan State Spartan in recent years, but both stadiums definitely border on religious. Think about how the game of football has changed even in recent history. College ball and “professional” ball are certainly related breeds, but also different in not unimportant ways. College ball is as much a professional endeavor for those that pursue it. I sat and watched this last year a Spartan football game up in the “nosebleed” seats
and watched as three young athletes were micro-profiled on giant screens that also informed me that Mountain Dew was now the “official” beverage of the Spartan Nation. These screens informed me as to which videogames were these athletes favorite growing up: *The Legend of Zelda* (and I can only surmise that this was actually *Ocarina of Time* but I’ll not split hairs), *Super Mario Kart* and *Golden Eye 007*. Clearly we have a Nintendo 64 generation on our hands. But this tells us something about games. They mean things to us.

This is why we study the evolution of games.

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**REFERENCES**


